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# Multiple Meanings of College:

## How Adult Learners Make Sense of Postsecondary Education & Why It Matters

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# Executive Summary

A big reason why millions of adult Americans turn or return to college later in life is to be eligible for more jobs and higher wages, but this is hardly the only motivation. Our analysis of in–depth interviews with 120 adult learners found that people commingle economic goals with a wide variety of other motivations, including:

- **Being a good role model**, particularly for one's own children;
- **Countering racism and discrimination** by pursuing a higher educational status;
- **Serving others** by developing capacities that will make one a better friend or community servant;
- **A sense of achievement** that comes with finishing a lifelong goal;
- **Fostering personal growth** by cultivating new skills and trying on new identities.

**Adults often entwine economic and non-economic motivations** in ways that suggest their mutual importance.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Understanding adults' multiple motivations for college can help inform innovative program offerings and new solutions that best support adult students. Education providers should:

- **Use recruitment messages that resonate with multiple motivations.** Recruitment officers should incorporate messaging around both financial and non-economic motivators that might resonate with adult learners.
- **Recognize, honor, and celebrate multiple motivations in advising practices.** Academic success offices and coaches should include personal, community, respectability, and familial motivations for attending and persisting in college.
- **Bundle alternative credentials with college credit.** Purveyors of alternative credentials should link their attainment directly to college progress—for example by bundling alternative credentials with receipt of college credit. Doing so would leverage the symbolic value learners place in college attainment while also offering learners educational products that may have near-term labor-market benefits.
- **Measure and value alternate indicators of student success beyond just higher wages and employment.** In addition to job, wage, and completion metrics, postsecondary institutions should include other measures of success such as community involvement.

**Key Takeaways for Postsecondary Leaders**

Adult college students have many motivations beyond higher pay and career advancement. Financial and other motivations are often commingled.

Serving as role models, combatting racism, achieving personal growth, and giving back to community all are valuable goals for college attendance in their own right.

Savvy educators find ways to recognize and honor multiple motivations to encourage college attendance and persistence.

Postsecondary offerings that are packaged as "college" and grant credit toward college degrees may best leverage short-term benefits of alternative credentials with the powerful motivators associated with four-year college diplomas.

# Introduction

There is one constant in an ever-changing labor market: a four-year college diploma is an important milestone on paths to good jobs and economic mobility. This is a big reason why millions of adult Americans turn or return to college later in life. But earnings and jobs are hardly their only motivations.

In-depth interviews with adult learners demonstrate that people enter or re-enter college for a range of goals. To be sure, most of them want the economic and mobility opportunities a college degree affords. But many also go to college to be good role models for their children, to fight back against racism and discrimination, to better serve their friends and communities, and earn the satisfaction that comes with accomplishing a long-held goal. Ambitions such as these should be recognized in the design of adult-focused education and training programs. Building programs that appeal to multiple goals—not just the economic ones—will make for more adults obtaining college degrees.

This brief explores the multiple meanings of college for adults who were either enrolling in college for the first time or were returning after completing some college earlier in their lives. Our examination of interviews with 120 adult learners conducted by CAEL and the Strada Education Foundation between 2019 and 2023 revealed motivations for returning to college that go far beyond the economic incentives typically prioritized in policy debates. Surfacing these multiple motivations is important for program design as well as public policy. Our work reveals just how meaningful college is in American culture. These meanings can serve as their own incentive and reward to college attainment. Ultimately, the goal of more inclusive paths to postsecondary success will be well served by honoring the many values Americans give to college degrees.

Our insights here are especially important at a time of great enthusiasm about novel alternatives to college diplomas. The proliferating ecosystem of new apprenticeships, training programs, and alternative credentials offer great promise for broadening pathways to mobility, but only if employers and learners alike confer value to the new offerings. While much has been said about the ambiguous market value of non-college credentials, the question of whether and how adult learners will find these new offerings appealing in comparison with the enduring cultural prestige of four-year college degrees is less often recognized. Our brief offers insight about how education providers might provide new credentials in formats that combine short-term benefit to learners while also leveraging motivations that may be specific to college degrees.

# Context: A Changing Credential Ecology

In recent years, the value and purpose of the four-year college degree have received renewed scrutiny. The steadily out-of-pocket cost of higher education for learners has let to growing questioning about the net economic returns to college degrees (Burning Glass Institute & Strada Institute for the Future of Work, 2024), and the demand for middle-skill workers outpaces the supply of workers for these jobs that do not require four-year credentials (Mabel et al., 2024). There is still ample evidence to suggest that, in general, bachelor's degrees are economically rewarding to those who attain them (Cuellar Mejia et al., 2023; Ma & Pender, 2023; Opportunity@Work, 2022; Strohl et al., 2024); yet the urgency to grow the ranks of four-year college graduates has been muted by a growing movement to diversify routes into well-compensated, career-laddered employment.

That movement has spawned a veritable deluge of so-called "alternative credential" offerings, for-profit training programs and boot camps, and a myriad employer-based strategies to break the cartel of the four-year diploma as the final arbiter of workplace mobility. Brand-new start-ups established and companies like Alphabet and Amazon are offering shorter-form credentials designed to provide workers pathways to good jobs without the big up-front investments of time and money typically required to obtain four-year college degrees (Agovino, 2024; Debroy et al., 2024; Federal Jobs for STARs Act of 2024, 2024; Intelligent, 2024; Liu, 2024).

The general presumption among advocates and entrepreneurs in this domain is that adults seek postsecondary training primarily, or even exclusively, to access higher wages and better jobs. Yet, economics encompass only some of the reasons Americans dream of obtaining college degrees. There is ample evidence that adults have many non-material incentives for pursuing postsecondary educations. A recent Strada survey, for example, found that adult community college students cite economic, personal, and civic motivations for their educations simultaneously (Strada Education Foundation, 2023). The research reported in this brief goes a step further to show that attainment of a college diploma holds powerful symbolic meanings for Americans independent of the labor-market value of the credential.

As the national credential ecology continues to evolve, it is important to understand how people invest certain kinds of credentials with special meanings that may be uniquely motivating. If people think about some kinds of postsecondary credentials categorically different from others, it may be difficult or even impossible for providers to substitute one for another and expect learners to respond similarly to the new offering. Yet the special meaning of *college* credentials might also be baked into new offerings in ways that leverage the special value Americans place on college diplomas to encourage journeys along fresh learning paths.

# Data and Methods

We draw on data from semi-structured interviews with 120 adults, primarily aged 25 years or older, who were scheduled to start college, were currently enrolled in college, or had just completed a college-degree program in the years between 2019 and 2023. The overall study sample comprises three separate cohorts: 61 interviewees contributed in 2019-2020; 11 contributed in 2021; and 48 contributed in 2023. Participants attended a variety of institutions and represented many different occupations and walks of life. Detailed demographic information is available for about 80 percent of the study sample (which was assembled from three different studies with different data-collection protocols). Of those for whom we have demographic information, 68 percent are female, 38 percent are White, 24 percent are Black, and 21 percent are Latine/Hispanic. While age ranges were recorded in different ways for the three cohorts, almost two-thirds of the total fell in the range of age 25 to 49 at time of interview. Detailed information about the three cohorts included in the study sample is available in Appendix 1.

In all three interview cohorts, respondents were asked questions about their experiences as adults in college. One of the protocols included specific questions about motivations for attending, persisting, and completing college degrees, while the other two protocols included queries about respondents' past educational histories and current college experiences. One of the three protocols explicitly asked respondents if they believed returning to college was "worth it" in light of financial costs. Importantly, none of the protocols specifically asked respondents about their motivations for returning to college—yet respondents very consistently volunteered it.

All interviews were digitally captured and transcribed verbatim. A team of researchers that spanned CAEL, Strada, and Stanford University's Pathways Network conjointly analyzed these data and assembled the insights presented here. Direct quotes included in this brief are attributed to the individual interviewees using pseudonyms.

# Findings: Adult Learners' Motivations for Postsecondary Enrollment

## BETTER JOBS, WAGES, AND CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Economic motivations are understandably prevalent in our interviews. Many cited wanting a college degree so that they can be eligible for higher wages and better opportunities where they currently work. A good example is Lilly, who works as a customer-service representative and is pursuing a bachelor's degree in business accounting to advance to a higher paying job in the accounting department. "I felt like I needed [a bachelor's degree] in order for me to progress financially … I wanted to have the degree plus the experience so that I could get paid better."

Others emphasized the skills that a four-year degree can help them attain to advance in their career at their current employer. Barney had been working as a surgical tech for 25 years and had steadily assumed leadership responsibilities at work: "They're gearing me towards management. So with that role in organizational management, [this degree] will help gear me towards a leadership management role. Hopefully I'll be able to ease more into this role as time goes on. I'm down to my last two courses."

The most commonly reported motivation for earning a college degree was to access better jobs, yet many of the people we spoke with did not report specific career goals as motivation. They understood that having *any* college degree is beneficial for work opportunities. Linda said, "At one point I realized, 'Gee, a bachelor's degree is like having a driver's license.' That's kind of the minimum, that's the benchmark minimum. And I should really do something about that.'"

"I actually had gone out to talk to some Chief HR Officers in companies in Rhode Island and said, 'Would you hire me? Here's my resume. Would you hire me at your organization without a bachelor's degree?' Some said, yes, others said no. And some said, 'If you got certified in project management and some other things, then maybe we would consider it.' But I realized that it was going to be hard to compete if I decided to leave [employer]. I would not be as competitive in the market, but I had still decided that I probably won't leave [employer] anytime soon."

**Ashley, enrolled in a bachelor's program after becoming concerned about her long-term employability**

## BEYOND ECONOMICS

Right alongside economic motivations, the adult learners with whom we spoke consistently cited additional reasons for pursuing college degrees. Below are the five most common we heard.

**Being a role model**. Many respondents who are parents talk about wanting to earn a college degree to be a good role model for their own children. Justin reported returning to college to be a better father to his daughter and a better husband to his wife after having spent time in and out of the criminal justice system: "I'm glad that I was able to walk the stage and show my daughter that this is the thing that she needed to do as well. Like setting the standard. Because growing up I never had that." For Justin, the power of role models extended to other men of color with backgrounds similar to his own: "I know that I have these core individuals that actually believe in me and that know that everything that I've done, I'm no different than them. I'm not special. I'm not this genius. I'm just a regular person and I was able to do it. So I serve them because this isn't just about me, this is about them."

**Fulfilling a personal goal.** Others emphasized the desire to achieve a self-defined accomplishment. They reported a lifelong goal of being a college graduate, of wanting to enhance their self-esteem, or to have the pleasure of learning in college. Donna, who earns below minimum wage as an Americorps Vista member, talks about earning her degree as an accomplishment in itself, which has afforded her more confidence in life: "I'm proud of where I am now," she says. "I'm happy, and I know I can get [my degree]. That's my goal. I'm going to get that degree within a year, and hopefully I'll get that degree with no money owed...I think the one reason why I really applied, and got accepted to [college], was because everything was perfect for my life journey. It was there. There was no excuse not to."

**Gaining respectability.** Others talked about college as a way to gain respectability from their work colleagues, family, and society in general. Brian works as an assistant manager at a pizza restaurant and also as a student-success coordinator at a local nonprofit; he told us about wanting a college degree so that he will feel like he "fits in" with his work colleagues and lives up to the expectations of the students he serves: "Everybody I work with has a degree, and I don't want to be the only one who doesn't, you know what I mean? And I think it's important to them because I don't want to preach to students, 'You got to go to school,' and talk about their plans for after and they should be going to college and I'm not. And I wasn't in college. It felt funny. They didn't know obviously that I wasn't in school, but I knew. My bosses knew, and I just wanted to be able to say ... I want to earn this degree on my own."

**Self-discovery and personal growth.** Many also reflected on how the experience of attending college brought pleasure and insight that they may not have experienced had they attended college earlier in their lives. Compared to their younger selves, they found they had more direction, more discipline, greater appreciation for learning, and a fuller appreciation of the financial cost and value of college.

"Yeah, I mean, I think I'll be really happy that I [completed my degree]. I think I'll feel a great sense of accomplishment. I do want to do other things, yes. And I don't know if this, the actual degree, is going to help me, but the process will definitely help me do the other things I want to do."

***- Paige, employed in a city tourism department***

Several people told us that their years of work and life experience had helped them understand what direction to take at this later stage in their lives. IT student Cameron explained, "I did a lot of things in my 20s. I experienced a lot of places, worked at a lot of different jobs in two different industries. I even went into hairstyling at one point. But at the same time, I still didn't know what I wanted to do. I was young, adventurous. I felt like the world is a new place and I'm just now being released into it, and there's a lot of things to experience. It wasn't until probably my 30s that I got this feeling of needing to figure out what I'm doing with my life, settle down, build a career … and be a contributing member of society. That took 12 years to get to."

Similarly, Jackie, in her 30s, recognizes that not only does the college coursework seem to come easier after having more than a decade in the professional world; she also knows how to compartmentalize her responsibilities in order to get things done. When the workday ends, she shifts into school mode: "I really take my own personal workload into account, like, my job and even at home, you know, family obligations, just whatever's going on … Over the years, I've gotten really good at multitasking, as we all do, unfortunately."

As adults get their bearings in college and begin to make progress towards their goals, they often gain a new vision of who they are as learners and a sense of pride in what they are able to accomplish. Sophie, a parent in her 30s, seemed genuinely impressed by how far she had come: "I was a single mom with nothing and I had no work experience, no life experience, no nothing and here I am at 34, I am exactly where I want to be professionally at least. I'm a few classes away from the degree which will just feel good. But I've gotten – I have worked, not gotten — nothing has been given. I worked for exactly what I wanted and it has paid off. So, in that aspect, I'm pretty proud of myself. Now, if I could just get life to quit knocking me on my butt that would be great."

"With the journey I took, I wouldn't change anything, because it's made me a very mature man that I am. Yeah. And it's also taught me a few things along the way that I might have not learned, had I gone the other route that I took. Yeah. So with that being said, you know, I love everything I learned."

***- Nolan, enrolled in a bachelor's degree program in midlife***

## MULTIPLE MEANINGS AT ONCE

Adults in college often do not cite only one reason why they have enrolled in a postsecondary program. Instead, they often intertwine multiple motivators into a larger, multi-faceted narrative. In the process they develop a sense of themselves as active agents in their own lives, developing a sense of purpose that includes, but is by no means defined exclusively by, financial and career goals.

**Enhancing identities and combating stereotypes.** Adults often come to their college decisions with significant amounts of life experience and responsibilities that inform their motivations to attend college. Many of them understand that a college degree can bring material rewards but also help them grow and refashion their identities. In our interviews, this was particularly prevalent among those who reported experiencing discrimination in the labor market due to their race, ethnicity, criminal history, or limited prior educational attainment. Rick told us that his struggle to get a job without having a college degree was a motivator for enrolling in college as an adult.

> The unfortunate thing is that a little over a year and a half ago, I was laid off from [my company] because of some financial issues they were having. And for the first time, the relevance of not having a degree became manifest, because even though I had years upon years, over 20 years of experience doing all these different things ... the first question they were asking is, 'So where did you go to school?' ... And it unfortunately revealed that there are a lot of folks who use that as a ... form of discrimination ... So it revealed like, 'Wow, this piece of paper is important,' and part of my journey of why I wanted to then get my degree, one part is I want that piece of paper.

At the same time, Rick says that he wants a college degree to "have that experience because that's the part that I always used to feel jealous. My friends would talk about how they heard this great lecture or, even, they had this amazing party that they all went to. It's still part of that learning experience. It's how we grow up."

Rick also talked about how he saw his barriers into higher education related to growing up as a Black man without much encouragement to attend college. Later in life he came to see a college degree as a pathway towards a brighter future: "For most of my life, and for most individuals... Men of color, women of color ... We are told exactly, this is where you should be. And, it's sort of like, this is the kingdom. You can move within this domain, but education gives us license to go outside of it." For Rick, the benefit of "that piece of paper" extends beyond just a higher salary or better career. It also includes a way of expanding the domain ("the kingdom") of his entire existence.

Previously incarcerated adults in college cited having a college degree as a means to remake both their resumes and their identities. Calvin wanted to earn a college degree to be eligible for better job prospects; he knew that his criminal record, along with his status as a Black man, hindered his potential job opportunities: "I had two felonies on my record, a misdemeanor, as a Black male in America. I had all that stuff and I didn't have my degree. So I said I had to get my degree to see what doors open up cause I know I have more to offer." Calvin viewed the degree as both a ticket to better jobs and as a way to push back against entrenched discrimination.

**Evolving narratives over time.** Others told us that while their initial main motivations for attending college were economic, they developed other motivations on the way to obtaining their degrees. Carmen talked at length about choosing among various majors based on perceived jobs and earnings after graduation, but went on to describe pride, confidence, and love of learning as a motivator for persisting with her coursework once she enrolled. She reported that her initial college experiences were difficult; but then she had a moment of revelation. "It's kind of stressful but at the same time, you're learning. You're learning. You're going back, reviewing, editing, … And then once you go back and review your paper, the final paper, you're like, 'Oh. I really did this?' It's a strong feeling that you get at the end…The things you couldn't believe you could do, you did it."

Linda, whom we met above, shared how her experiences in college "opened her mind" and helped her grow as a person and a professional even though her initial motivation for enrolling in college was "out of fear" of not being desirable to potential employers if she were to try to switch jobs.

> And as I started taking classes and completing some of the coursework, I became more engaged with everything, more engaged with my education, more engaged with my life, more engaged with what was going on in our community. And I remember sitting down and having a work evaluation, and the feedback that I got from my supervisors surprised me. They saw growth in me, they saw a change, they saw me doing things differently and being more proactive and more engaged with the folks that I work with. And I attribute it to…going to school, really opening up my mind.

With only a semester left of coursework at the time of her interview, Linda noted how much she was enjoying the experience, and volunteered that she would probably want to pursue a master's degree someday.

**Paying forward and giving back.** Adults often talked about their college journeys as combining their personal economic interests — and those of their loved ones — with more community-focused responsibilities. Sarah told us how school is "just a high priority right now in my life for myself and for the future of my children and for the financial stability of my family." She went on to say that her college experience had shifted her perspective and made her want to use her knowledge and network to help one of her friends get a new job. "I didn't have that frame of mind before [college]", she explains, "And if I don't do it for me, it's okay. If I can do it for somebody else. It's awesome. But if I learned that thinking, or if I learned that way to do it through [college], then I'm going to do it. So it's not even about me. It's just to be able to be there for somebody else, and it feels good."

Tracie invoked both the view of a college degree as imparting respectability as well as a desire to serve her Native American community as part of her motivation to obtain a college degree. "It got to a point where, through [my work at the local Native American museum], I really started to have that sense of self-identity again, and started to have that self-empowerment, and I started doing things...There's certain things that people just won't accept if you don't have a degree. Not saying from an organizational standpoint, as even the general public...It represents something to people."

These examples show that adult college-goers don't necessarily compartmentalize motivations, but experience them simultaneously while pursuing degrees.

# Contributors to Adult Learner Engagement and Satisfaction

The plurality of motivations we heard for returning to college plays a part in college persistence and completion. As psychologists have long understood, people tend to be much more committed to attaining their goals when the work required to do so is driven by a strong sense of purpose (Damon, 2009; Warren, 2013). Financial gain and career advancement can be strong motivations – but so too can serving a role model for one's children, fighting back against discrimination, helping a friend, and giving back to one's community.

These motivations can be enhanced by social and institutional arrangements that reinforce them. Interviewees pointed specifically to support from the following sources:

- **From higher education institutions.** Higher education marketing and outreach strategies and colleges' adult-friendly institutional models such as cohort programs, in-person and remote coursework, and personalized advising and tutoring support helped nudge adult learners to enroll and persist in their degree programs. One interviewee noted feeling support from not just the instructors, but also advisors and even the college provost.

- **From employers and coworkers.** Having encouragement from supervisors and coworkers also played a role in whether or not adult college-goers returned to college and persisted in their studies. One person told us they found it helpful to see that peers were able to balance school and other work and life responsibilities.
- **From friends and family.** Spouses, partners, or other family members sometimes supported interviewees financially—with tuition, or assuming household expenses—while they pursued their degrees. Many interviewees described how their family and friends provided emotional encouragement that aided in decisions to enroll and commit to completion.

In a portion of the interviews analyzed for this brief (n = 48, Cohort 3), researchers explicitly asked respondents if they thought their college program was "worth it." Respondents in other cohorts often volunteered this information. Here's what we heard:

- **Learning.** Many who said that their educational programs were worth it explained that they saw direct workplace applications to their education. Those who felt like they weren't getting a good education or who weren't learning something they didn't already know were less pleased with their experience.
- **Career and job prospects.** Many who thought their education was "worth it" focused on value in terms of higher salaries. Some reported discovering that their degrees had more meaning to potential employers and to themselves than they anticipated.
- **Reaching a goal.** Some saw their educational programs as worth it if one of their primary motivation for the degree was achieving something more personal. "Getting that piece of paper" could sometimes be worth it all on its own.
- **Cost and debt.** Those who had taken on considerable debt or who were paying a lot out of pocket often struggled with whether college would all be worth it in the end. Those who had debt from previous schooling tended to have strong feelings of regret that lingered into these newer educational pursuits.

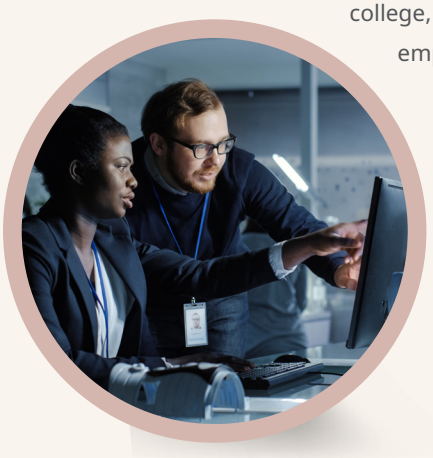
# Recommendations

Recognizing and honoring multiple motivations for returning to college in adulthood can help inform innovative postsecondary program offerings and new solutions that best support adult learners. In light of our findings, we offer the following recommendations to educational leaders.

**Use recruitment messages that resonate with multiple motivations**. Because adult college-goers have multiple and simultaneous motivations for going to college, recruitment offices should invoke these different motivations in their outreach to prospective students. While messaging around financial support, academic offerings, flexible schedules, future earnings, and career advancement potential are important, so too are messages that tap into goals of personal growth and giving back. Images of student parents studying alongside their children might tap sentiments about role modeling. Campaigns encouraging a "finish what you started" sensibility, or a promise that "a college degree is finally in reach" might spark the motivation of many who are part of the way to diplomas.

Enrollment managers and higher education advocates might also reconsider how they design, and talk about, a wider range of postsecondary programs for adults so that the recipients of these messages think about a "college degree" as more than just the traditional four-year bachelor's diploma. New educational credentials that also carry college credit might recognize the powerful symbolic value pursuing a college degree, even while providing valuable workforce credentials before the bachelor's degree milestone.

**Recognize, honor, and celebrate multiple motivations in advising practices.** College success offices should honor multiple motivations in their advising and student support services. Many of our respondents noted that advisors and coaches who were invested in students' academic progress *and* their personal ambitions were important motivators. Advisors and coaches should seek ways to tap students' multiple motivations. For example, they might ask students open-ended questions about what their goals are for college, and then tailor encouragements that emphasize those goals.



Schools serving adult learners would do well to build institutional scaffolds that support multiple motivations. These might take the form of training instructors and staff on the insights presented in this brief, and official encouragement from leadership that progress in college serves multiple goals—not just financial ones.

**Key Takeaways for Postsecondary Leaders**

Adult college students have many motivations beyond higher pay and career advancement. Financial and other motivations are often commingled.

Serving as role models, combatting racism, achieving personal growth, and giving back to community all are valuable goals for college attendance in their own right.

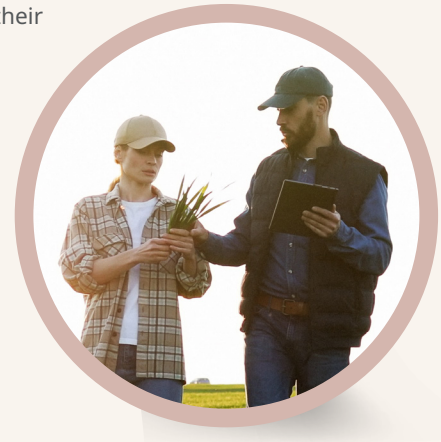
Savvy educators find ways to recognize and honor multiple motivations to encourage college attendance and persistence.

Postsecondary offerings that are packaged as "college" and grant credit toward college degrees may best leverage short-term benefits of alternative credentials with the powerful motivators associated with four-year college diplomas.

Programs that explicitly recognize the multiple assets adult students bring to college might also re-enforce the motivation for enrollment and persistence. Policies that offer credit for prior learning might be a powerful tool in this regard. So too might be testimonials from alumni who are working parents, formerly incarcerated, or who used their college experience to navigate a major life change. Hiring alumni with stories like this to tell could also be a powerful motivator for future students.

**Bundle alternative credentials with college credit.** Despite widespread enthusiasm about the promise of non-college credentials and certifications, there is very little systematic evidence of the labor-market value of these new offerings (Hanson, 2021; Ositelu et al., 2021; Berger et al., 2024). It also remains uncertain whether learners themselves will find the new offerings meaningful or compelling (Laryea et al., 2021). Yet one thing is clear from our research: the goal of obtaining a college diploma is highly and multiply motivating. This simple fact suggests that purveyors of alternative credentials would be well served by linking their attainment directly to college progress – for example by bundling alternative credentials with receipt of college credit. Doing so would leverage the symbolic value learners place in college attainment while also offering learners educational products that may have near-term labor-market benefits.

**Measure and value alternate indicators of returns to postsecondary attainment.** While higher wages and better job opportunities are critically important success metrics for schools and students alike, colleges and other postsecondary providers should find ways to measure other dimensions of student success. Doing so might take the form of serial surveys of students at different points in their college progress, or focus groups with alumni that seek to document the full range of benefits people derive from their educational experiences. Relevant data may also include the number of alumni who work in civil-service, religious, or other community-based occupations, and indicators such as rates of volunteering and philanthropic giving.



# Conclusion

Adults often bring mature and complex perspectives on why education is important. Pursuing higher education later in life can bring well-documented economic benefits, but also produces other values that matter for individuals, families, and communities. Educators would do well to honor those values explicitly: in program design, in recruitment and student-success efforts, in the classroom, and in the alumni office. People go back to college to get better jobs, but they also return to model ambition for their children, to fight back against racism and discrimination, to fulfill personal goals, and to give back to their communities. It is all of these values, together, that make higher education such a powerful institution in the lives of so many Americans. Educators will do well to recognize, honor, and preserve those values.

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## APPENDIX: DATA AND METHODS

Tables A-1 and A-2 outline the demographic distributions of the respondents from the different interview cohorts used to inform this brief. As stated earlier, this brief incorporates data from three sets of semi-structured interviews conducted by the research team contributors: (1) 61 interviews conducted from 2019-early 2020, (2) 11 interviews conducted in 2021, and (3) 48 interviews conducted in 2023.

**Table A-1:**
**Demographic distribution for interview cohort 1**

| Demographic | Count of respondents |
|---|---|
| *Gender* | |
| Female | 44 |
| Male | 18 |
| *Race/Ethnicity* | |
| American Indian or Alaska Native | 2 |
| Asian | 2 |
| Black or African American | 11 |
| Hispanic or Latino or Spanish Origin | 18 |
| Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander | 1 |
| Other | 2 |
| Two or more races | 4 |
| White | 22 |
| *Age* | |
| 18 - 24 | 3 |
| 25 - 34 | 17 |
| 35 - 44 | 13 |
| 45 - 54 | 11 |
| 45-65 | 7 |
| 55 - 64 | 4 |
| No response | 7 |
| *Household income* | |
| Less than $15,000 | 4 |
| $15,000 - $24,999 | 4 |
| $25,000 - $34,999 | 3 |
| $35,000 - $54,999 | 15 |
| $55,000 - $69,999 | 6 |
| $70,000 - $99,999 | 7 |
| $100,000 or greater | 5 |
| No response | 18 |
| *Parental status* | |
| Not a parent | 20 |
| Parent | 41 |
| No response | 1 |

**Table 2:**
**Demographic distribution for interview cohort 3**

| Demographic | Count of respondents |
|---|---|
| *Gender* | |
| Female | 25 |
| Male | 15 |
| No response | 18 |
| *Race/Ethnicity* | |
| American Indian Alaskan Native | 4 |
| Asian | 1 |
| Black | 13 |
| Latino | 3 |
| Two or more races | 1 |
| White | 16 |
| No response | 20 |
| *Age* | |
| Under 30 | 8 |
| 30-39 | 10 |
| 40-49 | 14 |
| 50 and older | 7 |
| No response | 19 |

In interview protocol (1), respondents were asked to participate in a 30-minute to one-hour interview with Strada Education Network researchers and in return received a $50 gift card to the store of their choosing (Amazon, Wal-Mart, Target). In interview protocol (2), respondents were asked to participate in a 60 minute interview with CAEL researchers and in return receive a $50 gift card. In interview protocol (3), respondents were asked to participate in a 45-minute to one-hour interview with CAEL researchers and in return received a $100 Visa gift card. For all interview protocols, the interviews were audio recorded (in addition to some of the interviews being video recorded for interview protocol (1)), transcribed, de-identified, and assigned a pseudonym. After the interviews had been conducted and transcribed, interviews from each protocol underwent an independent and thorough inter-coder reliability assessment; this informed a coding scheme, from which the study themes were developed. For this brief, contributors added additional coding schemes that aligned across the interview cohorts and new pseudonyms that aligned with other reports using this same dataset.

## ABOUT US

As the movement to tap and grow the talents of working adults continues to gain momentum, our three organizations — CAEL, Stanford Pathways Network, and Strada Education Foundation — are engaged in a research partnership around Designing Opportunity. Our series of briefs offer data-driven insights for educators, employers, and other key organizations serving working/adult learners. These free and highly readable resources offer practical advice for making programs serving adults more effective and enjoyable. To access other briefs in this series, visit www.cael.org.

Recognizing that adult learners and workers are the backbone of the U.S. economy, CAEL helps forge a clear, viable connection between education and career success, providing solutions that promote sustainable and equitable economic growth to those who face barriers due to racial/ethnic, gender bias and socioeconomic status. CAEL opens doors to opportunity in collaboration with workforce and economic developers; postsecondary educators; employers and industry groups; and foundations and other mission-aligned organizations. By engaging with these stakeholders, we foster a culture of innovative, lifelong learning that helps individuals and their communities thrive. A national, nonprofit membership organization established in 1974, CAEL is part of Strada Collaborative. To learn more, visit cael.org and stradacollaborative.org.

Anchored at Stanford University, Pathways Network is an internationally distributed community of researchers and practitioners working to build a cumulative science of progress at school and at work. We begin from the premise that educational and career progress is incremental: One step at a time. Understanding how people navigate forward movement requires careful attention to learning, meaning, belonging, and identity – in tandem with cutting-edge computational tools to observe progress at scale. More at pathways.stanford.edu.

Strada supports programs, policies, and organizations that strengthen connections between postsecondary education and opportunity in the U.S., with a focus on helping people who face the greatest challenges. We advance this mission through research, grantmaking, social impact investments, public policy solutions, and Strada-supported nonprofit organizations, including CAEL, Education at Work, InsideTrack, and Roadtrip Nation. We collaborate with students, educators, employers, policymakers, and other partners to help create more equitable pathways to opportunity. Learn more at stradaeducation.org.